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Guide to Local Evaluations of Even Start Family Literacy Programs

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Guide to Local Evaluations of Even Start Family Literacy Programs

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Introduction

The *Guide to Local Evaluations of Even Start Family Literacy Programs* is a resource for Even Start project directors, local evaluators of Even Start family literacy programs, and the state education agency (SEA) staff who oversee the Even Start family literacy program within each state. It is intended to provide common messages to those different audiences about the purpose and requirements of local evaluation in Even Start and the options to be considered in the design of local evaluations. Stronger local evaluation will improve the quality of Even Start programs and lead to better outcomes for Even Start families.

Each local Even Start project director selects an evaluator to plan and execute an evaluation that documents the achievement of participant outcomes and provides information useful for program improvement. Together the evaluator and project director determine the scope of the evaluation, frame evaluation questions, and identify data sources. Then, the task of the local evaluator is to provide an objective picture of participant outcomes and the factors that contribute to or inhibit progress. To be useful for program improvement, the evaluator must place the project's outcomes in context, and compare results and operations to state-established indicators and local project objectives. The local evaluator synthesizes a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative information to develop recommendations for improvement and then tracks the results of program changes over time.

The information in the *Guide* is designed to help readers think about the best choices for designing an objective evaluation that will have utility for the program. Evaluators and project staff can begin to consider the options for identifying evaluation questions and data sources by starting with the organizing framework presented in Chapter 2. Separate chapters (see Chapters 3 through 7) address each component of the framework (program design, program implementation, participation, learning milestones, and outcomes). Chapter 11 provides advice on organizing information from all data sources into a useful report.

Other chapters address frequently asked questions that have been posed by project directors and local evaluators. Chapter 1 addresses "big picture" issues about how evaluation in Even Start is different and similar to other types of evaluation and provides advice on requirements, scope, rigor, roles, and so forth. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 are about selecting and working with an evaluator, including developing agreements and plans. Chapter 12 addresses questions that state coordinators have raised about improving the quality of local evaluations.

The *Guide* is intended as a reference document to be consulted at key points in the evaluation process. Optimal uses for the *Guide* are:

- ***Prior to selecting an evaluator,*** project directors should begin by reading Chapters 1 and 2 to prepare for deciding on the scope and nature of the evaluation.

- Project directors will find Chapters 8 and 9 helpful in **selecting** and working with an evaluator.

- **Once an evaluator has been selected,** the project director should provide the evaluator with a copy of the *Guide*. Together they should discuss the material in Chapters 1 and 2 and then work through Chapter 10 to **develop the evaluation plan.**

- Depending on the direction of the evaluation plan, the evaluator can then consult Chapter 3 through 7 (each about one component of the plan) for ideas about **executing the evaluation.**

- Once the **evaluation is underway,** the project director and evaluator should read and discuss Chapter 11 to plan the **reporting of findings.**

The *Guide* does not include detailed information about the Even Start program requirements; a local evaluator will want to obtain information from the project staff or state coordinator about Even Start components and requirements. See information about program guidance at http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/evenstartguidance02.doc. The *Guide* is not intended to be a substitute for expertise that can only be gained through formal training and experience in evaluation design and measurement. We recommend that programs hire evaluators who have appropriate qualifications and credentials (see more in Chapter 8).

A Word About Terminology

Terminology associated with roles varies by state so we have made some compromises. In this *Guide,* we have used "project director" to mean the staff member who has primary responsibility for the operation of the Even Start program and who is the person responsible for hiring and working with an evaluator. In some states, the role might be labeled project coordinator or co-coordinator. We have used the term "state coordinator" to mean the staff member who is designated by the SEA as the main point of contact for the Even Start program in the state and who would be charged with oversight of Even Start subgrantees.

Even Start subgrantees are partnerships between one or more LEAs (local education agency) and one or more nonprofit community-based organizations, public agencies other than an LEA, institutions of higher education (including two- and four-year institutions), or public or private nonprofit organizations other than an LEA. We use the term "partners" to refer to the agencies that comprise the Even Start subgrantee partnership. Other agencies outside the partnership that may provide services, e.g., transportation, health, early childhood education, are referred to as "collaborators."

A Glossary at the end of the *Guide* defines technical and legal terms used in the text. Efforts were made to avoid using technical evaluation terms wherever possible, given the diverse audience intended for the *Guide*.

Chapter 1

Background

This chapter focuses on the foundations for local evaluations in Even Start— what's expected of evaluations and why. It links local evaluation to program improvement. Chapter I covers:

- key evaluation concepts;
- lessons learned; and
- federal and state requirements

Even Start family literacy is a complex program designed to provide high quality and intensive literacy services for families with great educational and economic needs. Success requires well-qualified staff members who can pinpoint literacy needs, provide instruction based on scientific research, and motivate families' commitment to sustained participation. Full participation also depends on community partnerships that provide the range of supports that families need in order to address literacy goals.

Because the needs of families vary, the Even Start program is necessarily flexible. Depending on a local population's needs and partners' resources, Even Start family literacy programs vary by configuration, staffing, and instructional level. Local populations vary enormously—single teen mothers with infants and toddlers, new immigrants from extended families who do not speak English, adults with learning disabilities who lack the skills for employment, incarcerated mothers with young children, and others.

The Even Start law focuses on the family unit with individual attention to a range of family members—children from birth through age seven and their parents with limited literacy skills.

Policymakers have challenged family literacy providers to design and provide services that are sufficiently rigorous and extensive to produce meaningful differences in family members' literacy outcomes. *The local evaluation statutory requirement is part of addressing those challenges.* The Even Start statute includes local evaluation as one of fifteen required program elements. The designated purpose of local evaluation is program improvement.

Requiring an independent local evaluation is somewhat unusual for a program of such small scale. (Even Start programs typically serve about 30 to 50 families.) The requirement for independent local evaluations is intended to provide family literacy programs with data they can use to develop and improve high quality, intensive services that can make a meaningful difference in literacy outcomes for families in widely varying circumstances.

"SEC. 1235. PROGRAM ELEMENTS. Each program assisted under this subpart shall —
15) provide for an independent evaluation of the program, to be used for program improvement."

Independent means that the evaluator is not a member of the program implementation staff: program leaders are expected to benefit from an objective, evidence-informed perspective on whether or not families are making progress and

on the factors contributing to or hindering progress. The very complexity of Even Start—four core instructional components, support services when necessary, a wide range of children by age, high needs families—may make it more difficult for project staff to gauge meaningful progress. An independent perspective can help determine appropriate benchmarks, distinguish between services that might be supportive but not sufficient for making real progress, sort out strategies that are and are not working, and make recommendations for change.

Evaluators provide evidence-based advice. Evidence of progress toward outcomes is crucially important and motivating for staff working with hard-to-reach families. Evidence that shows lack of progress and points to redirection is especially critical in settings where staff may feel that caring attitudes alone are enough. The ultimate clients for the evaluator's work are the families in Even Start programs. The results of the independent evaluator's work improve the chances that families will reach important educational goals.

In many if not most cases, this ambitious vision for the role of local evaluation has not been realized. In 2000, Abt Associates prepared a report, *Synthesis of Local and State Even Start Evaluations,* which revealed that evaluators rarely included recommendations in their reports and that projects rarely used data systematically to manage and improve programs and results. Project directors with little evaluation experience may not have the expertise to steer evaluation planning in a useful direction or may find it difficult to identify qualified evaluators who understand family literacy. Resources for local evaluation have often been meager. Too often, Even Start evaluations have been simply summaries of existing descriptive data already collected by programs, or non-systematic observations of program operations without discussions of outcomes. Neither approach provides guidance for the continuous improvement of Even Start programs as envisioned by law.

Key Evaluation Concepts

Throughout this document are key assumptions about evaluation in Even Start. Summarized below, these assumptions could serve as the opening for a planning discussion between project directors and evaluators, and for training in local evaluation concepts.

- **Purpose of local evaluations.** Local Even Start evaluations are primarily designed for program improvement, that is, to identify what is and is not working well and the reasons why, in order to make changes that will improve outcomes for families. Evaluation is about learning—learning how to assess progress in attaining results and learning how to make a program more effective in achieving results. To facilitate learning, evaluations must yield information that project staff can use.

Even Start supports integrated family literacy services for high needs parents and children, primarily from birth through age seven, and has three interrelated goals:

- *to help parents improve their literacy or basic educational skills;*
- *to help parents become full partners in educating their children; and*
- *to assist children in reaching their full potential as learners.*

The term "family literacy services" is defined in section 9101(20) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family, and that integrate all of the following instructional activities:

(A) Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
(B) Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
(C) Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
(D) An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.

From The William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Programs Part B, SUBPART 3 of Title I of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Unless otherwise noted, all further section references in this document are to the ESEA.

- **Program theory.** Evaluation planning begins with a shared understanding by the evaluator and program staff of the program's theory—how particular activities and approaches are intended to produce short and long term results for participants. A good grasp of program theory and design is foundational to an evaluator's ability to recommend meaningful program improvements.
- **Central role of outcomes.** All local Even Start evaluations should report on and discuss participant learning outcomes, including specifically the results on the state's performance indicators and local objectives for participants. Each state collects information within a set of common topics and reports the data annually to be aggregated at the federal level according to the GPRA (Government Performance and Results Act) indicators (http://www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/2004plan/edlite-evenstart.html).
- **Analytic vs. advocacy perspective.** Local evaluations should focus on exploring areas that need improvement in order to recommend changes. Simply reporting information about program characteristics and participant outcomes is a part of evaluation, but is inadequate for improving programs. Evaluations may document what projects do well but their primary purpose is not to "rubber stamp" project decisions or to be public relations tools.
- **Phase of development.** The focus of evaluation will vary by a project's stage of development; evaluation approaches need to match the local project's stage of development and reflect its needs. In first-year projects, for example, more emphasis should be placed on success in implementing the program design, including setting up systems for capturing baseline information about participants on entering and throughout their participation in Even Start. Evaluations of projects that have been operating for several years may take a longitudinal look at the trajectory of participants' progress and track the effects on participants after they complete the program.
- **Process and outcomes.** Evaluation for program improvement implies attention to program operations and processes as well as participant outcomes. The evaluation of even a first-year project should measure participants' progress toward outcomes as well as program implementation in order to determine which aspects of the program are contributing to or hindering participant progress.
- **Stakeholder involvement.** Key staff, collaborators, and advisors together formulate the important questions that the evaluation should answer and also interpret and use the results. An independent evaluator is a key collaborator in this team effort and not a sole actor.
- **Evidence base.** Local evaluations are based on the systematic collection of information from many sources; they provide objective evidence about project outcomes and operations. Observations by the evaluator and recommendations for improvement must be based on evidence collected by the evaluator, the staff, or from program records. It is not sufficient for the evaluator to assume that the project is operating in exactly the manner described in the proposal nor is it adequate to gather information solely from the project director.
- **Qualitative and quantitative methods.** Local Even Start evaluators draw from both qualitative and quantitative methodologies when planning comparisons, selecting instruments and data collection procedures, choosing approaches to analysis, and presenting findings. For example, a statistical analysis of a

series of adult progress tests might be augmented by qualitative systematic observations of adult education instructors and interviews with adult students.

- **Systematic and objective approaches.** A corollary to the above statement is the expectation that evaluators will employ systematic and objective approaches. Objectivity rests on the nature of data, the way data are collected, and the way information is summarized and interpreted. Even Start evaluations frequently use interviews, focus groups, and observations to gather perspectives from staff and parents and to understand the quality of program services. Those methods are useful if executed systematically, that is, if questions are carefully designed to address relevant variables (specified in advance) and responses are treated as data in an analytic manner. Similarly, objectivity is greatly enhanced by gathering information from multiple sources about the same phenomenon, e.g., reviewing home visit records, observing home visits, and interviewing home visitors as well as parent participants. Ideally, the evaluator will use state performance indicators and other data collected through the course of program activities in several ways. For example, information about attendance patterns summarized by site opens a window into program operations; the same data might also be used to compare the performance of those who have been enrolled in programs for different lengths of time.
- **Standards and expectations.** Embedded in the concept of evaluation is a determination of value, that is, comparing findings to expectations—whether the comparison is with the performance of a reference group, a level of expected mastery, or established standards of quality. Simply describing what has happened in a project, e.g., discussing observations and interviews or test results, is not enough for evaluation. Instead, the evaluator should make relevant comparisons: comparing the observations to standards of quality for instruction, examining how interview information depicts what was expected, and/or placing test results in the context of normative development, of students in other programs, or of individuals' previous rates of change. Statewide results for performance indicators are a key source of comparison for local projects.
- **Audiences.** The primary audiences for Even Start local evaluations are project directors, staff members, and advisory boards associated with the local program. Secondary audiences are state Even Start coordinators and those charged with technical assistance to help local programs improve. Because an evaluation report has numerous audiences, it should be a "stand alone" document with enough context that readers from different perspectives can understand it.
- **Evaluation vs. research.** Even Start evaluations measure local program implementation and outcomes for family participants. They are not primarily designed to generalize results beyond the local program. In other words, local Even Start programs are not conducting research to build field knowledge. For that reason and given the scope of Even Start evaluations, it is not realistic to expect that local evaluations would include all the elements of research designs (see more about rigor in Lesson #3, below).

Lessons Learned

We recommend approaches in this *Guide* that take into account the practical realities faced by Even Start evaluators. Challenges that program directors and evaluators face include: the scope of resources for local evaluation, identifying the right mix of expertise and experience, the inappropriateness of traditional design approaches, the limitations of measures included in state performance indicators, the difficulty of measurement in the family literacy field, and the relationship between program staff and evaluators. Below are ways to address these challenges.

Lesson #1. Evaluations require adequate resources and a specific focus. State coordinators and local program directors have not always set aside sufficient resources to plan and execute a useful local evaluation. Annual Even Start local evaluation budgets top out at $10,000-$15,000, the range appropriate for carrying out the type of evaluation described in this *Guide*. Smaller budgets mean that project staff and evaluators cannot analyze outcomes and also target a known area of concern for additional data collection, e.g., *to what extent do early childhood staff consistently implement language production strategies and literary curriculum as intended?* Where evaluation resources are limited, it may not be possible to carry out such a focused inquiry, meaning that the evaluation falls short of what is expected of Even Start programs.

In some cases, limitations on resources might mean that evaluators do not collect specific data but simply rely on information the program already collects to meet state evaluation requirements. We recommend that at minimum, evaluators identify a specific focus for new data collection each year and also analyze outcome data collected for performance indicators. It is essential that programs allocate reasonable resources to evaluation (see more in Chapters 8 and 9).

Lesson #2. There is no substitute for evaluation expertise. In trying to maximize resources, program directors sometimes choose persons for the role of evaluator who have no training in evaluation but may provide other needed expertise to the program, e.g., an early childhood expert who can provide curriculum guidance. When programs employ evaluators without training in evaluation, they sacrifice both systematic data collection and a trained evaluator's objective eye.

Even Start evaluators should have had training in evaluation design, measurement, and data analysis as well as background or experience in one or more content areas relevant to Even Start. Thus, for example, a university professor in the early childhood department who also has had some training in research and measurement might be the perfect evaluator choice. Evaluators are assumed to have the expertise to apply general evaluation concepts (see Chapter 2) to specific applications, e.g., to summarize different types of assessment scores appropriately or to set up a database to track program information. The *Guide* does not reproduce the type of information found in evaluation texts but shows how and where to apply evaluation procedures in the Even Start context.

Lesson # 3. Project scale affects the rigor of design. When planning evaluation designs, local evaluators may be challenged by some features of Even Start, including the small program populations, the continuous enrollment policies, the great variation in intensity of treatment within the program population, and the selection criteria related to population definition (i.e., those with the greatest needs for literacy services). These features complicate traditional quantitative designs that depend on comparisons between groups (randomly assigned or matched in some other way) and measurements at fixed intervals, and have challenged even large-scale evaluations of Even Start programs.

Local Even Start evaluators often need to rely on comparisons based on norms, whether from a test's norming population or performance results from other programs, e.g., from a state's performance indicator reporting. Given the small sample size of most Even Start programs, local evaluators must think creatively about comparisons and analyses: combining results over several years to look for patterns, employing designs that use multiple measures for individuals so that individuals can be compared to their own baseline performance, pooling data with other programs with similar populations, and making various types of internal comparisons. For example, Even Start evaluators may look carefully at dosage (amount of instructional contact time) as a modifying variable (a way to sort categories) since individuals at the same site and performance level may vary greatly in their cumulative and current program year contact hours of instruction. (See more in Chapter 6.)

Thus while Even Start evaluation designs are not intended to provide generalizable findings, local evaluators should use the most rigorous designs possible, and thoughtfully plan the selection of measures, data collection schedules, and appropriate comparisons.

Lesson #4. Encourage projects to expand beyond state performance indicators. Evaluators help identify appropriate outcome and progress measures for program and participant goals. Although some states do not require common measures for program evaluation, the advent of state-level performance indicators (aggregated at the federal level via GPRA indicators) has advanced measurement in Even Start. In some cases, state-identified measures may not be a good match for specific contexts and populations. In those cases, evaluators help program staff select valid outcome measures that will augment state-prescribed measures. For example, the state-prescribed early childhood measure may focus only on reading readiness literacy skills measured at the beginning of kindergarten, but a local program's child population may be largely below the age of three. In that case, the evaluator would help identify appropriate language measures of child outcomes that link with school readiness outcomes.

Evaluators should also help review and identify measures and procedures that are used to track progress toward outcomes. (See more in Chapter 7 about learning milestones.) Periodic progress monitoring can help explain why outcomes have or have not been achieved. For example, a review of school-age children's records of skills mastered during supplemental tutoring sessions might shed light on why some children have not met end-of-year expectations, that is, which skill deficiencies remain.

Evaluators should have input into the instruments used to measure local progress and outcomes and incorporate the results of those measures in their evaluation analyses.

Lesson #5. The search for appropriate assessments involves compromise. Instruments that assess early childhood learning (including tests for non-English speakers), adult learning (especially English as a Second Language), parent-child interactions, and parent education may not be as well developed as instruments in many other fields. These learning areas pose special measurement issues in terms of validity (content and predictive) as well as reliability. In order to gauge the range of behaviors of interest reliably, stronger instruments tend to require considerable administrative time and expertise. Group testing may not be appropriate. Further, staff members are often frustrated by the futile search for a "perfect" instrument which simply may not exist. Evaluators can help in many ways: working through the various trade-offs posed by different instruments during the selection process, assisting with administration issues and scoring of assessments, and guiding interpretation. Evaluators should collaborate with staff in identifying and selecting instruments for measuring participant progress and outcomes.

Lesson #6. Effective evaluators engage with the program. While the local evaluator takes an independent perspective, his or her analysis is based on evidence that has not been gathered in isolation from program operations. It is important at the outset that program directors and evaluators work closely to identify the focus of evaluation, including areas of concern or program weakness that may need further study. Once data have been analyzed, the evaluator can help program staff interpret the meaning of evidence and shape recommendations for improvement that are feasible in the context of the local program. To do so, the evaluator needs a working knowledge of the Even Start program gained through review of materials, observation of instructional components, and discussion with staff and families. Given the range of populations, contexts, and approaches to program delivery, it is not advisable to conduct an Even Start evaluation "on paper" or at a distance from program operations. Evaluators and Even Start staff should establish a working relationship informed by familiarity with project operations.

Federal and State Requirements

Specific requirements for the required Even Start local evaluations may vary by state, and program directors and evaluators must be familiar with any state expectations. However, the essential roles and purposes of the independent local evaluation are the same for all projects, that is, to provide critical information for continuous program improvement to lead to better participant outcomes.

Differences in state requirements have typically emerged in response to the lack of specificity and utility of local evaluations. Some state policies define evaluator roles and provide basic requirements for evaluation reporting. A few states have prescribed evaluation requirements in detail, including specific tasks and information to be collected by all evaluators.

Some states prescribe approaches for one aspect of local evaluation; for example, states commonly require that evaluators include results for state performance indicators in the annual evaluation report. Simply complying with that state requirement is not sufficient, however, to fulfill the federal Even Start statute's requirements for a local evaluation that provides information which can be used for program improvement. Evaluators need to go beyond mere reporting to discuss ways to enhance outcomes based on data collected. This *Guide* offers project directors and evaluators ideas for integrating the basic federal and state requirements.

This *Guide* is designed to complement specific state expectations by providing an overall framework within which those state requirements fit. No matter how open or prescribed the state policy about evaluation, however, all Even Start local evaluations should address certain minimum expectations:

- Local evaluators summarize, analyze, report, and discuss data about participant outcomes (the state-required performance indicators as well as locally-determined group and individual outcomes and benchmarks) and explain results, including possible reasons for lack of progress;
- Local evaluators collect data about local project objectives;
- Local evaluators develop focused evaluation questions about program areas that need to be improved and focus data collection on those areas;
- Local evaluators collect evidence objectively and synthesize that information; and
- Local evaluators provide specific recommendations for program improvement based on evidence.

Local evaluators and project directors should take into account the results of the state's required indicators as well as objectives identified in the local project's approved application when identifying the focus for local evaluations. Evaluators can help programs set up systems to collect state-required data accurately, analyze that data, and base recommendations on those findings along with other information collected for the local evaluation.